

## The Priorities for the Organized Jewish Community— Federation as the Facilitator for Service Delivery\*

WILLIAM AVRUNIN, Executive Vice-President

*Jewish Welfare Federation, Detroit, Michigan*

CONFERENCES are conferences and work is work. There is always the hope that we can relate them to each other. It's not easy to bring what you do at your desk to the Conference: and it's even harder to bring the wisdom of the Conference to what you do at your desk. And yet, to make any sense that is precisely what we must do.

What we—most of us—do at our desks seems remote from the grand concepts, the basic philosophy, the academic theory, no matter how impressively articulated. What does all this have to do with what I say to the woman at the other end of the phone (she may even be a contributor) whose mother, she charges, was unjustifiably denied admission to the Home for Aged, or whose grandson is being sent home from camp because of some "stupid counselor?" How is all this fancy Conference talk related to how you feel about the campaign worker who, two weeks after the closing date, finds he has mislaid the prospect cards you sent him two months ago. Or, to elevate the problem slightly, how does all this help us deal with an angry group of students who spit on "process" and "procedure" and insist they won't wait another day for the only program that has relevance and meaning. You can hardly expect them to understand that you and the rest of the Jews have been waiting over 2000 years for Mashiach.

Even in these mundane tasks we are

involved in something bigger than we usually realize, certainly bigger than the sum total of what all of us do at our desks.

In fact, Federations or Councils have developed a character, an institutional entity beyond anything their founders ever intended. There is evidence that at first they simply planned to do together some things that would be more expensive, less efficient, less effective if they continued to be done separately. In the very early days they merged services and service organizations. The next step, in the larger Jewish communities, was to form a voluntary association of agencies. This is still our basic characteristic even though we have moved beyond the associated services in considerable measure. I hasten to add that we have not moved as far as some think, certainly not as far as some would like. I hope we never will.

The title given this presentation recognizes both "Priorities for the Organized Jewish Community" and "Federation as the Facilitator for Service Delivery." I choose to deal with the latter first.

In the early days not only the language but the motives were more primitive. In Detroit, the handful of German Jews, most of whom had philanthropic motives and who had already made it in America, included some who did not want to be embarrassed by the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. They organized Americanization classes, a health clinic, free loans, even free showers. These things and several additional services were expensive. They could be made

---

\* Based on a presentation made to the Staff Institute of the Jewish Federation—Council of Los Angeles, October 24, 1971.

more economical and efficient by a single central campaign. Money was a great facilitator of services then, and it still is.

As a voluntary association of agencies the major purpose of Federation is to make it possible for the agencies to function at the highest level of service and in the most productive way. Almost immediately, however, the central body takes on a personality of its own and begins to behave like what will later be regarded as an organized Jewish community. In distributing or budgeting funds it exerts an influence in the direction of one area of service or another. The more prestigious the central body, the larger its potential for such influence. The Federation's ability to flex its muscles with the agencies is limited by a number of factors, two of which predominate:

1. It develops a vested interest in keeping the central body together. Obviously the counterpoint of voluntary association is voluntary separation.
2. It responds to contributor interest. As an extreme though negative example, the campaign could be destroyed in most cities if the Federation tried to make an allocation, even a token one, to the Council for Judaism.

Within these limits Federation has a responsibility to do everything it can to help the agencies deliver services. This is a matter of posture as well as a matter of function. It is not the purpose of a budget committee to save money; in spending money its objective is to see that the community gets the most service for its dollars. The usual method of the welfare fund is deficit financing, or meeting the deficit of an approved operation at an approved cost.

But the annual allocation is only one way in which the Federation facilitates agency service. There are many

other ways if we really mean it. Let me enumerate some:

1. Assistance with capital projects. This can take a variety of forms such as making capital grants, running capital campaigns, or assisting in agency campaigns.
2. Making money available for upgrading of staff, for special research and demonstration programs from central endowment funds.
3. The development of central administrative operations such as insurance, retirement, public relations and data processing.
4. The development of a central land bank through which the Federation acquires real estate with a long-time view to possible agency use.
5. The encouragement and recruiting of influential laymen for agency boards and, in turn, the use of agency leaders in Federation activity.
6. The encouragement of interagency projects and relationships which appear desirable. Our focus is more likely to be on the larger fields of service. The Los Angeles Federation Multi-Service Center on Fairfax is a good example.
7. The availability of Federation staff and resources for consultation and to assist with agency problems. For example, making available the names of key leaders, or the names and addresses of Jewish residents in an under-served area.

I want to get back to posture. With the right posture, the specifics will come. Federation has been referred to as a family of agencies and services. The label is descriptive and useful. Good agencies make a strong Federation even though strong agencies may make life miserable for the Federation executive. Federation has a right to be proud of agency achievements, to be sensitive to

agency shortcomings, to feel responsible for agency services. They are members of the Federation family. And the community has a right to hold the Federation accountable for its family. Federation is an appropriate place for individuals to complain about inadequate agency service or improper handling and Federation's status depends on how seriously it deals with these complaints.

This does not mean that Federation tells the agencies what to do. Nor does it mean that Federation is a neutral arbitrator. It does mean for example that as the parent body of the agencies, Federation undertakes to interpret their program during the annual campaign and between campaigns.

If I'm told as I have been, that our Home for Aged cruelly ties old people in their chairs so they won't make trouble, I feel safe in saying that I know the administration of the Home and it's not conceivable, but I will certainly check into the charge. If you or I cannot identify with the agencies this much then we do not have a Federation family and we need to do something about that.

It is our job to strengthen the agency services to the point where we *can* identify with them with confidence. This calls upon our authority as well as our resources.

All of this assumes—and properly, that the Federation will be more than an association of agencies—that it will develop a character of its own.

It is bigger than the sum of the entities associated to form it in the first place. It goes beyond facilitating agency services to modifying, adding and eliminating functions. Federations naturally develop aspirations to increasingly becoming the organized Jewish community.

We must understand that while all Federations have moved in this direction, none has fully reached the objective. The term, organized Jewish com-

munity, infers an inclusiveness which just doesn't exist in the voluntary American society. Federations basically do not function in the field of religious life and ritual or even in all of the secular organizational life. Perhaps this is desirable. The totality of the Kehillah had its advantages, but the voluntary nature of the American Jewish community with all its limitations has greater influence with lesser legal authority. In any case, it is not an option open to us.

Now that we have some idea of what the organized Jewish community is, we can deal with the other part of my assignment, "What are the priorities?" The question brings an almost impulsive, automatic response these days. We must strengthen Jewish life, enrich it, steer more and more of our resources in this direction. This has become the platform posture, the slogan which all applaud. We respond to it in general, with enthusiasm, and in specific terms, with bitter differences. We all want more Jewish education, but we cannot agree on a form. The demand for Jewish identity has become a weapon in the hands of the advocates to beat down legitimate reservations about grants to day schools, observance of kashruth and programs for Soviet Jewry, campus allocations and community relations projects.

The whole business of planning and priorities needs to be put in some kind of perspective. A former chairman of our Education Budget and Planning Division in Detroit, whom I grew to admire and respect over the years, repeatedly told me how important it was to spend an increasing proportion of available local-operating funds for educational and cultural programs which would enrich Jewish life. He meant it quite sincerely. When I pressed him as to where we would get this money, he would say what was obvious—we should be allocating less to the hospital, to the

family service agency, to social services in general. He was also a member of our Board of Governors. Whenever the question of extra money for foster-home care or institutional treatment of children (a very expensive operation) or services to the aged, or research for the hospital came before the Board of Governors, he always voted for it. After a while, I called this to his attention. His answer was simple. "How can a good Jew deny such humanitarian needs?"

Priorities must be determined by process not by pronouncement. They are best determined by those who respect the total program of the organization. The factors in determining priorities are many. Foremost among them are the availability of funds and the interest of the contributors.

An important factor in making it possible to determine priorities based on some objective and rational criteria is the authority and prestige of the central body. Only after establishing a long history of making sound decisions can we hope to have new decisions accepted with confidence. A basic factor in this process is the Jewish population of one's community—the Jews who live there and the way they live, not how we think they ought to live. This is the realism of the Federation movement. It deals with people and their needs. This does not mean literally those needs which serve their physical existence and comfort. When their needs include education, cultural programming and enrichment services, as they do in American life, those services move to a higher priority in the community.

With this as a perspective, let me try to list some of the priorities of a Federation without reference to order of importance:

1. It is important to maintain the voluntary association at the most effective possible level. This sounds self-serving,

but that self includes all of us. It would be ridiculous for us to give a high priority to any item no matter how convinced we are of its validity if this meant that the people who provide us with our resources, and the services which have joined us voluntarily would no longer maintain their affiliation. American Jewish history is replete with examples of attempts, locally and nationally, to organize authoritative central bodies all of which ended in failure.

2. A second priority would be to maintain and preserve necessary communal services. I realize that the term "necessary" requires some judgment. This judgment is not based on moral value but on such factors as a) whether such services are otherwise available to Jews in a manner which can serve them; b) whether the services are needed by the Jewish community; c) whether the Jewish community feels an obligation to provide them for the community in general; and d) whether these are services which substantial numbers of Jews prefer to get under Jewish auspices as an evidence of identity.

3. In view of the current concern about Jewish continuity, we would be fully justified in giving special recognition to those services which strengthen and enrich Jewish life. I refer a) to the strengthening of services now within the Federation orbit and b) to adding those on the periphery of Federation asking for recognition and inclusion.

Our legitimate concern in this area may challenge our established method of operation. It deals with educational and cultural institutions which insist on maintaining their differing philosophies and principles. They would like financial help from the central body, but they resist our attempts to relate them, to make them accountable, to fit them into a communal pattern. It is not like bringing together separate leisure-time

programs into a Center Association nor like developing a central family service agency. Their concept of the central body as a money barrel and our conception of ourselves as a planning body creates conflicts. The resolution of these differences presents us with a community organization priority.

4. Our priorities must include recognition of the needs of the old and the young who may need our help. A variety of problems beset the young these days from the simple classical instances of broken homes and emotional disturbances to the contemporary expressions of those problems on the drug scene or in generational conflict.

The castoffs of our imperfect world are often our concern ahead of social reform. The parent explains to her caseworker, "My problem with my children can't wait until you improve the world."

5. We have a major responsibility to participate as a Jewish community in the provision of services for the general community. Whether these services be in the field of health care or vocational adjustment, or recreation, or any other area depends on what suits a particular community. The case can be made that this is just as deeply rooted in Jewish tradition as anything else we might do. I refer here to a recent paper by Dr. Mark Zborowski, cultural anthropologist on the staff of Mt. Zion Hospital, San Francisco.

6. The priority which pervades all priorities is to do all of these things, and some others, in a way which reflects the interest and the needs of the people and the groups which make up our community. In some cities this may mean full support of day schools. In others it may mean what appears to be a seemingly over-proportionate support of a cultural camping program. In a third, it may mean an outstanding Jewish hospital. I am not ready to sit in judgment

as to which of these is a better Jewish community.

Priority judgments cannot be made scientifically and objectively. If an agency comes along with strong board support for the development of an expensive treatment facility for disturbed children in a community which, by general agreement, has a low level of Jewish education, it is likely that the community will provide institutional care for disturbed children. Aggressive groups and individuals in our pragmatic society have an impact on community determination of priorities. This is especially true if they have their own resources. But despite the most overwhelming resources behind a proposal there are limitations to the community acceptance of its appropriateness.

In Detroit we accepted a gift of a hunting lodge from a very important community leader even though the lodge was in the upper peninsula 300 miles away. Our camping agency came to an easy decision that it would serve wonderfully for out-post camping to attract older teenagers, a program recommended by a six-year-old study and by-passed since by higher priorities. The project worked. But suppose the donor's camping lodge were in Alaska? Our organized community would have had the authority and prestige to withstand any pressure to use it programmatically.

I am sensitive to the danger of being misunderstood regarding the usefulness of objective facts of social need, population movement and so forth. We cannot disregard these in the pragmatic world in which we live. If we create a service which nobody needs or wants, it will soon be voted out of business by lack of use. But statistics alone are not enough.

Our major communal decision concerns the priority for overseas and Israel causes. Across the country 60 percent

to 90 percent of communal funds raised are allocated to the United Jewish Appeal and associated programs. How was this decision made? Was it based on objective facts? Was it the wish of contributors? Could a Federation survive and do otherwise? Does it respect the desire for Jewish continuity? The answers are obvious. Then why do the proportions differ from one city to another? Because there is also the ingredient of judgment, tradition, and vested interest within the outer limits of the range.

I have avoided giving specific answers to questions for which there are no specific answers. I now would like to address myself to a number of principles which may be helpful in finding one's own answers. Principles which govern the voluntary association we call an organized community as well as the organized community which is limited by the voluntary nature of the association.

1. Federation was organized to improve the level of financing and planning for health and welfare services for members of the Jewish community who needed help. This was during the period when the Jews and other forward-thinking groups were concerned with the alleviation of social problems of individuals (poverty, alien status, poor health, desertion). As the character of the Jewish population changed the same organizational instrument, grown more sophisticated, was found to be useful in a) the prevention of social problems and b) the enrichment of Jewish life.

2. The Federation idea soon became a unifying force in Jewish life as a by-product. It achieved a community of interest around the function of philanthropy that could not be and still has not been achieved by American religious institutions, by fraternal organizations, by nationalist (political) bodies.

3. There is a recent trend toward substituting the by-product, community, for the earlier central objective of "function-centered" service. This is advanced by a more homogeneous Jewish population with an increased interest in the Jewish cultural and educational programs seen as serving Jewish identity and continuity.

4. The emphasis on "representative democracy," and "representativeness" grew with the development of enrichment or cultural services, i.e., Jewish education, Centers, and, in the instance of civic defense agencies, the desire for a "voice of the Jewish community." There is no such thing in America as an organized Jewish community with an authoritative voice. There is only a voluntary association of people and organizations for specific purposes about which the overwhelming majority can agree. This requires a sense of limitations and restraints. To keep a voluntary association alive one cannot do violence to a sizeable segment. It means that an implied discipline in practice is often more effective than resolutions or votes.

5. The "democratization" drive must be related to the basic necessity for effective service. An agency board which includes the young; the intellectual; the small and the big givers; women; rabbis, orthodox, conservative and reform; "new faces" and so forth may give the appearance of democracy. At the same time, it may administer second-rate services—with no money, no know-how, no concern about its function. We could end up with beautiful representation and very bad services. To assure ourselves that this doesn't happen we must make certain that while we introduce every element of community representativeness, we keep our eye on the basic requirement—institutional and functional identification. No matter what secondary criteria we may apply we must deal with people who care about family service, about

Center service, about camping, about service to the aged, about Israel, about a successful campaign.

We must apply ourselves to both fronts: to representativeness and service, with an eye on the people we serve and a sense of balance. This recognizes that the method of the Federation is not majority rule, but statesmanship and diplomacy in an effort to reach a consensus.

6. Because of these limitations Federations are basically conservative organizations. They assimilate new ideas slowly and cast off old ones reluctantly. They reflect the imperfections of our society. Their power to change society is limited, and the degree of their leadership role is directly related to their status, prestige and ability to make an impact on Jewish thinking.

By basic character they cannot be symmetrical in structure, scientifically objective in functioning or all-inclusive in communal programs. They must recognize that there is room for Jewish programs and services outside their jurisdiction—some of which may find their way under the Federation auspices eventually. And some continue to flourish separately. Brandeis and Yeshiva Universities are two good examples of the latter.

7. Despite their limitations Federations have provided American Jews a useful instrument to meet the needs of each generation over a period of about 100 years. They have served as a platform on which Jews can stand together in dealing with communal problems, enriching Jewish life, participating in American democracy. The Federation is the Jewish address for our people in trouble anywhere in the world, for facing the herculean task of saving the remnants of post-war European Jewry, for befriending the battle-worn people of Israel.

By now it belongs to the community and has become part of our Jewish heritage. It has the ever-growing potential of increasing responsiveness to community wishes, sensitivity to community needs and accountability for community problems.

The professional—and the layman—who grasps the grandeur of the idea of community will find his activity in Federation more than a responsibility or a job. What we are called upon to do—in the field or at our desks—can be a very rewarding and enriching life experience for us as men and women and as Jews.